

Statement of Leslie Williams

Senator Grassley, Senator Breaux, members and staff of the Senate Select Committee on Aging, Good morning. My name is Leslie Williams. I have been a licensed nursing home administrator for 13 years. The last 10 of those years, the staff of NHC HealthCare of Merritt Island and I have provided care for approximately 2000 patients in our Florida community.

I began working in nursing homes when I was sixteen years old. It was then that I knew a career in long-term care was my future. I initially thought about being a nurse, so I followed the 3-11 shift supervisor on rounds one night at the center where I was the evening receptionist. One round did it for me and I realized that my personality would not allow me to keep a job where I could not affect change rapidly without going through the "red tape". So with all the wisdom of a 16 year old, I decided to cut through the red tape and become the scissors - I would be the administrator.

This is where God began working an amazing plan for my life. I attended Milligan College, a small Christian liberal arts school in Johnson City, TN. My mother's parents lived there and I was fortunate to have them close through my college years. My grandparents were very special to me, and my parents placed great value on them and on all elders. My junior year of college required an internship and I shipped off to Phoenix, AZ, to work in a skilled nursing facility. That summer I rotated through all the departments of the facility, physically doing each job. I knew that I needed to have exposure to all aspects of the nursing home to be able to be a credible leader to the staff of my future center. I also worked as a Nursing Assistant to support myself financially. I made \$3.65 an hour! As it turns out, that part of my internship was the most valuable and rewarding. I returned to TN to complete my senior year and applied at a local nursing facility to work as anything. It happened to be a center owned by National HealthCare Corporation (NHC). The administrator at that center sent my application to home office and the next thing I knew, I was off to interview with the Vice Presidents for a job as an administrator in training. I was hired in September of 1986, finished school in December of 1986, became a licensed administrator in March of 1987 and received my very first center in November of 1987, in Winter Haven, FL - I was 22 years old.

I have since opened a 120 bed center in Merritt Island, opened an 85 bed unit Assisted Living Facility in Merritt Island, and added 60 beds to the original 120 in Merritt Island. All that in a total of 13 wonderful, challenging, stressful, jam-packed years. God has blessed me incredibly. That He has given me these opportunities and seen me through these years continues to humble me.

Making life worth living for the elderly in our care is what we are about. Delivering medical care is but a part of our responsibility. To assure that the world does not pass our patients by, we attempt to bring the world to them. We have a rule in our facility, if it is not illegal, unethical, or immoral and it costs less than \$100.00, every staff member is empowered to meet the request of the patients without having to seek anyone's permission. We have purchased, clothing, radios, kiwi fruit, Burger King Whoppers, pizza and even bag balm for one lady as she was certain that would help her sore joints. It is difficult to take elderly patients on a week long cruise, so we brought the cruise to them. This complete with ports of call throughout the world returning to Miami, home of Miami Vice's Don Johnson and his pet alligator who accompanied the medication cart on rounds. (The alligator that is, not Don). All patients were armed with water pistols. Katie Lyons age 92, particularly enjoyed using hers throughout the day. Unfortunately for me, this was the day our Vice President decided to come and tour our center. It was a "cleansing" experience for all.

Can you believe that some of our patients had never experienced a s'more? I couldn't, so one July fourth, we celebrated with a bonfire (with our county fire department on standby of course). The staffs children

toasted marshmallows and we served them up on Hershey bars and graham crackers. What a sight to see Marie Shelton age 91 sticky with a marshmallow -and chocolate smile. Memories can still be made at 90.

This, Senators is what makes a job, a life experience. The staff is the key - and the challenge. I appreciate that the Committee is looking into problems we face with finding and keeping Nursing Assistants. This must be a partnership solutions. Neither the government nor long-term care providers can solve the problems we face working independently from each other. The Committee is looking at creating national minimum staffing requirements. As you look at that alternative, I ask tht you consider three things.

Quality is not Quantity

The nurses and nursing assistants who touch these patients provide the special moments I've shared with you. These people have a heart for their job. Mandating numbers will not guarantee hearts. Assuming that the law dictating the number of bodies in my center on a daily basis will guarantee quality is a flawed concept. While it is logical that 10 nursing assistants can get more done than 6, give me six who love what they do as opposed to 10 who are collecting a check - I'll take the 6y, more importantly, so will my patients. By mandating those 10, I may have to subcontract to an agency that supplies temporary help. They don't know my patients. They don't know that Mr. Regar has to have 2 sweet and lows in his tea with dinner, or that Mrs. Whitaker prefers to use her walker to get to the bathroom, not the wheelchair.

The nursing assistants are the backbone of our facility. We utilize them to assist us with recruiting. It's their testimonials that advertise our open positions, they are the contacts to reach for more information. They even interview prospective employees. Who better to determine if someone has a heart for this work - you can't fool them. Best yet, these nursing assistants feel valued, appreciated and recognized for their knowledge and talent.

When classified advertising didn't bring the hearts we needed, we decided to grow our own. My Director of Nursing developed a two week class to prepare potential nursing assistants to challenge the state exam. We worked with the Welfare to Work program in our county. Within 14 months 78 nursing assistants passed their class and began a career in health care.

Now, to keep them once we have them. That is the next step National Healthcare Corporation has many programs to recognize excellence in quality patient care. The Presidential Excellence Program encourages patients, families, and staff to recognize the special, over and above efforts of our staff. The facility rewards this recognition with monetary bonuses and public acknowledgment of their actions. The Partners in Excellence plan awards bonuses to all staff who have assisted the center in achieving goals in patient care. Twelve million dollars was given to employees in the first three years of the program. (Sadly, the Medicare Prospective Payment System has forced the company to reduce the money available for that program, however, it does still exist). The annual Partner Appreciation Banquet honors staff who are nominated by their peers for excellence service. They attend a regional banquet and enjoy a special day of awards and recognition hosted by corporate officials. We work hard to keep staff we have. Yet despite these efforts and more, there aren't enough nursing assistants to fill our positions.

Staff to Meet the Patients Needs

FL has minimum staffing requirements. I meet them, but not because they are the law. I actually exceed them when at all possible, because those are the numbers my patients need. Each center varies in the

level of care it delivers and the type of patient they serve. My numbers may not work for the center in the next town. They may need more or less. Florida law requires that I staff 51.5 nurses and nursing assistants combined in a 24 hour period. Given my patient mix now, my staffing budget asks for 66 direct care givers - NOT administrative staff. Do I meet this budget every day, sadly no. You can help me with this, allow me to tell you how.

Respect and Professionalism

There is a shortage of people who desire serve in long-term care. One of the major contributing factors for that is respect - rather the lack of it. Why should people chose long-term care as a career? The responses I receive when I am asked what I do for a living may give you some insight. "Oh, you work in a nursing home - I'm sorry, Isn't that depressing?". Or the worst yet, just an immediate response with body language communicating suspicion and disdain. Can you imagine how a nursing assistant feels? Avis Gem began her career in long-term care as a housekeeper 11 years ago. She so enjoyed being with the patients, she decided to become a nursing assistant. She works tirelessly sometimes 7 days in a row, even pulling double shifts - 16 hour days of caring for our patients. Her day consists of being hit, kicked, pinched, spit on.... hugged, kissed and loved. She has her hands in things that are not mentionable in polite company. She puts up with administration and regulators critiquing her care, then comforts families as they watch their loved ones decline in health. She escorts rehabed patients to their waiting cars for the triumphant trip home. After working this 16 hour day, she comes home to a husband who expects dinner, a grandchild who wants a playmate and a house that must e cleaned. At midnight she has put her family to bed, washed the dishes and sits down to watch some TV. Into her home comes the familiar face of the local attorney... "Is your loved one being abused or neglected in a nursing home?".... She flips the channel to a late night news broadcast and sees our Secretary of Health and Human Services telling the nation that good or bad, all nursing homes need to be watched like a hawk. -SHE, Avis, needs to be watched like a hawk. This all after 16 hours of devoting herself to her patients needs. Why should she return to work the next morning? Would you?

NHC Healthcare of Merritt Island has made Avis a level 3 nursing assistant. She has climbed our internal career ladder. She earns a little more money and has status among her peers. We've give her some extra training to perform her job and have placed her in a mentoring role for new nursing assistants. Those who desire can follow on this ladder -- if they have the heart. You can help keep Avis encouraged to stay in her job. You can help me attract more like her. Set an example by demonstrating respect for her profession - the profession of long-term care. Value her work, her heart. Work with us in a partnership to foster dignity, not despair. You and I expect her to treat your parents and grandparents with dignity and respect, does she deserve any less? Allocate reimbursement for the employees of long-term care - specify its use for salaries, not the corporation - for the staff. Help those looking for a career aspire to serve in long-term care. Anyone can flip a burger, it takes hearts to care for our nation's elderly. Be the leaders that change the value we place on our elders and those who care for them.

Quality not quantity will affect the well being of our patients. Laws mandate bodies, our patients deserve hearts. Providers are also patient advocates. We stand in agreement with those who desire high quality care. We ask that those who seek higher staffing levels understand that there is more to the picture than simply hiring more people. When a facility is "shorthanded" this is not because the administrator or the company decided it should be that way. There must be qualified, caring people to hire! There must be money to pay for these people. Ten dollars never will buy fifteen dollars of groceries. Having overseen the construction and opening of three long term care facilities, I know firsthand that the phrase, "build it and they will come" does not apply to our situation. Recognize this industry and it's employees for the valuable service they provide. Create a partnership with us to care. Remove the adversaries who make a living criminalizing our people. Andy Adams, the president of NHC said it best, "you cannot punish your way to excellence." When these issues are acknowledged and changed, then and only then will the

number of people required to care for you when you need a nursing home be available.

I ask the Committee to look for Florida and what the legislature and our Agency for Health Care Administration are doing to improve the environment for those working and living in nursing homes. Last May, the Governor signed a bill into law that gave us real tools to better serve our patients. It included:

- Creation of a "gold seal" program to recognize exceptional nursing homes that provide innovative care.
- Registered Nurse Monitors employed by the state to work cooperatively with nursing homes to address issues before they become problems.
- Creation of a pilot teaching nursing home project. Additional funding that can only be used to recruit and retain nursing staff.

There are many other parts of the law and Agency initiatives that time does not allow me to go into. The point is that our state is moving toward a partnership with us to make life better for our patients.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify at this forum. We face a tremendous challenge in staffing hearts to provide loving care for your parents and grandparents. I look forward to a cooperative effort with you and our communities to raise awareness of our needs. I stand ready to work with you on achieving this goal.